

SLEEPING AROUND

Art--with an iPod--in a Louisville hotel

By Phil Vettel - Tribune staff reporter

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21C Museum Hotel

700 W. Main St.

Louisville, Ky.

Two days before I was to check into the 21C Museum Hotel in Louisville, I got a phone message from Alicia.

"We're looking forward to your stay," she said, "and just wondered if you had any musical preferences."

Musical preferences? Right. Because the 21C Museum Hotel not only provides iPods for its guests, the hotel also custom-programs each player.

That's certainly the most dramatic of this boutique hotel's myriad upscale features, but there are plenty more.

Open since mid-March, the 21C Museum Hotel is quickly establishing itself as the place to stay in Louisville--no small feat with nearby grand, historic hotels The Seelbach and The Brown.

But from the bright red penguins that perch along the building's exterior edge to the 9,000 square feet of contemporary art space that is essentially an extension of the lobby, this hotel made bold statements throughout our visit.

CHECKING IN: The check-in desk is one of those spare, minimalist setups that are all the rage in modern hotels; the difference is that the nattily attired people behind the desk are friendly and warm. Just a few minutes elapsed between the time my wife and I pulled our car to the front door to the time we, and our luggage, were happily ensconced in our room.

ROOMS: There are but three floors of rooms here, 91 rooms in all. All have king beds or two queens. Our room, No. 212, was as spacious as a suite. The king bed was fitted with super-luxurious, 500-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets. The bed was set with five pillows; more were tucked away in the closet. The far wall of exposed brick was hung with some contemporary paintings and a 42-inch-wide, flat-panel HDTV. A small alcove contained an ice bucket, glasses and an imaginatively stocked (and pricey) honor bar.

A large desk with a sleek, blue-glass top held writing paper, pen and a cordless phone; the desk chair is a Herman Miller Eames design. Tucked in a gray folder with our room key was the login and password to use in order to access the high-speed wireless Internet connection, which is complimentary.

BATHROOMS: Luxury personified, and all the room two people might reasonably require. A full array of toiletries by Malin + Goetz lined the shelf above the sink. Fixtures are all high-end Kohler designs. Custom shower curtains adorned the in-tub shower. The towels were delightfully soft, and hanging in the closet were two luxurious bathrobes so big that even an extra-large person could get lost in them.

KIDS/FAMILIES: The hotel doesn't discourage kids in the least, and slightly older children with an appreciation for weird-looking art might get a kick out of the surroundings.

ROOM SERVICE: Is provided by Proof on Main, the downstairs restaurant that already is considered one of Louisville's best. Room service is available at breakfast, lunch and dinner, approximately from 6 a.m. to midnight.

PERKS & PEEVES: The biggest perk of all is the free contemporary art museum that begins in the lobby and stretches down a long staircase into a large viewing area. The displays change regularly; the art we viewed in September, for instance, has been replaced by installations by John Waters and Dan Dutton. The aforementioned iPods are playable through the clock radio (which has a docking station) or the provided earbud-style headphones. But in addition to custom-programmed music, each iPod is programmed with an audio tour of the museum installations.

The fitness center is open 24 hours; spa services are offered 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Saturday. Two newspapers--the Louisville Courier-Journal and the New York Times--are left by the door every day. Proof on Main is first-rate, and the adjacent bar pulls in a young, good-looking and well-dressed crowd on weekends. And the location is superb, a short stroll from the riverfront and such attractions as the Louisville Slugger Museum and the Muhammad Ali Center.

Our sole peeve: Though I'm told it's right inside the Guest Services folder, we never found the Channel Guide to work the TV. In-room movie service is not available, though the concierge desk has a number of DVDs, and a DVD player, available on request.

BOTTOM LINE: Room rates range from \$189 to \$359; we paid \$239. Taxes (room and occupancy) total 15.1 percent. Overnight valet parking is \$15. 877-217-6400 or 502-217-6300; www.21chotel.com

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